Learning to Cherish What We Have

After a 22-hour flight and many transfers, the Mobile Medical Mission (MMM) arrived in Swaziland in southern Africa for a five-day trip to share medical resources and provide health care services.

People here have the shortest lifespan and the highest HIV infection rate in the world. Members of the medical team were shocked upon learning this information from the World Health Organization, while packing medical supplies for the trip.

The average Swazi lives to the age of 32, and the portion of the population infected with HIV has reached 40%. Even more tragic is that 38.6% of the pregnant women here are HIV positive. Many babies are orphaned or die soon after birth through vertical infection from AIDS.

Adding to these problems, shortages of water, poor hygiene and insufficient nutrition have made children here highly vulnerable to malaria, tuberculosis, acute respiratory infections, diarrhea, parasitic infections, and skin infections. Death rates for infants and children under five are at 10.5% and 15.3% respectively.

"Will this little angel grow up ... I can't help but wonder every time I see a sick child," said one member of the team. Tears welled in her eyes, "no one can watch such a tragedy and stand by idly.

This MMM, dispatched in cooperation with Changhua Christian Hospital, responded to a call from people in extreme need of health care assistance in a country on the other side of the globe. The members gave up their jobs and crossed the Pacific Ocean to come to the aid of locals in this tiny African kingdom.

As soon as they arrived, the actual conditions on the ground made their hearts ache. Wei Chi-tao, the
superintendent of Changhua Christian Hospital was particularly struck by the standard of the lunches at a local elementary school. He found children crouching under the eaves of the school to get out of the burning sun, wearing blank expressions as they picked through their food with thin dry fingers. Every day was the same: sugar mixed with cornstarch. No wonder it was so hard for them to show any joy.

Over 60% of Swazis are Christians; therefore, besides medical services, Reverend Huang Yi-wen made use of his time there and translated The Bible sentence by sentence for locals. The children sang the gospel with their sweet voices and the angelic music moved the hearts of the hardworking doctors and nurses.

"The people here are not the ones getting treated and helped, we are," said Huang Shu-ping, a pharmacist, and mother of two. Having seen the hardships children endure here, she was inspired. "I am no longer so frantic about taking care of my two sons," she said after returning from the trip.

Huang said frankly that she did not miss her two sons all that much during her time in Swaziland because she had started to realize how fortunate they were. Even if he refused to finish his meal, her elder son would be in no danger of suffering malnutrition, and the constipation problems that the younger one occasionally suffered would be easily taken care of by the best physicians in Taiwan.

Her life has changed since her return, and she has learned to cherish what she has. "This was a trip of love," she said, reflecting that her experience in Swaziland was a story she could tell her grandchildren.